

Defensive Use of Stun Guns Increases

Charges made last week that several officers of a police precinct in Queens had used electric stun guns to torture suspects have shaken the New York City Police Department. But in New York and other cities across the country, the battery-powered devices that shoot volts instead of bullets are gaining popularity among law-enforcement officials and civilians who consider them a benign and effective method of self-defense.

While New York City officials approve of the stun guns for official use, they are seeking to tighten the laws to prevent the public from buying the weapons.

Mayor Koch, said Robert Goldman, deputy police commissioner for legal matters, "doesn't want to see the current notoriety escalate the use of these things among the public."

"But for police dealing with a violent person," he said, "surely they are a desirable alternative to having to use a firearm or some other weapon that may cause death."

Differences in Models

The two best-known models are the Taser, an acronym that stands — with a couple of letters transposed and one omitted — for Tom Swift and His Electric Rifle, and the Nova, the kind that officers of the 106th Precinct are accused of using to torture suspects in custody.

Both devices use electricity to immobilize, scrambling the body's impulses so that muscle control and balance are lost for a brief period. The two models work differently, and are classified differently under the law.

The Taser, manufactured since 1974 by Taser Industries in Monrovia, Calif., and two predecessor companies, is designed for use at a distance. A nine-inch-long device that looks like a flashlight with a curved handle, it shoots two darts attached to wires that extend as far as 15 feet. Once the darts strike the body, they send out electrical currents.

Police departments in eight major cities are using or testing the Tasers, according to the company. The police in Los Angeles have used them more extensively than any other force, firing the darts on suspects more than 1,000 times since 1982.

The Nova emits a 50,000-volt electric shock that leaves small burn marks on the skin. It is designed for close-contact situations because its two probes must make contact with the skin.

"It's an uncomfortable feeling; I've tried it a few times," said Conley Giles, the vice president of Nova Technologies of Austin, Tex., which has manufactured the XR 5000 model since 1983. Powered by a nine-volt battery, it is about the size and shape of a transistor radio.

Mr. Giles said his company had sold Novas to hundreds of police forces across the country, including many in California, Ohio and Florida. He also

said they were growing more popular as self-defense weapons among women, as well as men who work in high-risk areas or professions.

He is not concerned that the events reported in New York last week will damage the reputation of the stun guns. "There's going to be abuse of any product," he said.

He said that the guns had such low amperage that "they cannot cause physical harm," even for those with heart problems. "You get 20,000 volts from a little shock of static electricity," he said. "And these are 50,000."

The Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms classifies the Taser as a firearm, because a small explosive propels the darts. The civilian model, which costs \$325, can be sold only by a licensed firearms dealer.

The law on the Nova is more vague, said Commissioner Goldman, which leaves open the possibility that it is not illegal to possess one, depending on its use.

"That's why we want to introduce local legislation that will clarify this and preclude its sale, possession or storage for any reason by civilians," he said. The Commissioner said state legislation to achieve the same aim was pending.

He said the Nova, which costs \$69.95, can be purchased by mail order, but was sold mainly in gun shops.

The sale and possession of Novas was banned to both the public and law-enforcement agencies in Michigan and Hawaii, and to the public only in New Jersey and Wisconsin, according to company officials.

There is no ban on use of the Taser by law-enforcement agencies, according to John Taussig, a vice president of Taser Industries, but he said sale and possession had been banned to the public in New York, Michigan, Hawaii and Pennsylvania.

Used in Courtroom

The New York City Police Department has bought 55 Tasers and has ordered 50 Novas. Commissioner Goldman said they would be used only by the officers in the Emergency Services Unit, who deal with violent and emotionally disturbed individuals and with hostage cases.

Commissioner Goldman said the Novas would be modified by the department for distance shooting by the attachment of six-foot poles and remote triggers.

The United States Marshal Service has also issued Nova stun guns to its districts across the country.

The gun was used in New York on March 25 when marshals in Federal court in Brooklyn used it to subdue three defendants who were accused of bombing corporate buildings and military installations and who authorities had said were members of a group called the United Freedom Front. The marshals said the three had refused to



The New York Times/Edward Hauser

Shock device: Stun guns are being used increasingly by the public and by police departments around country.

leave the courtroom after the judge ordered them out.

"We have three of the guns, and they are secured in a safe in my office," said Charles E. Healey, the United States marshal for the Eastern District of New York. Mr. Healey said the guns had been given out to marshals for defensive use only in "high priority" court cases involving demonstrators, terrorism or narcotics.

Suit Over Height of Building In Washington Is Dismissed

WASHINGTON, April 27 (AP) — A lawsuit by three Washington residents who want to stop construction of a downtown building that would overlook the White House has been dismissed by Federal District Judge John H. Pratt.

Judge Pratt ruled Thursday that Carol Currie of the Citizens Planning Coalition, Kathryn A. Eckles of the Dupont Circle Citizens Association and Anne Sellin of the Residential Action Coalition's zoning committee had waited too long to bring the suit challenging the city for authorizing the office and retail building.

The residents contended that the height of the 12-story Metropolitan Square building would pose a security threat to the White House.